Realism, socialist realism and China's avant-garde: a historical perspective

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In January 1993 a large exhibition entitled 'China's New Art, Post-1989', consisting of 150 works from some of the most important contemporary artists in mainland China, opened as the showcase of the Hong Kong Arts Festival. One of the chief curators of the exhibition, Chang Tsong-zung (Johnson Chang), was based in Hong Kong and played a key role in establishing the international image of contemporary Chinese art.[1] Chang created the exhibition with the aim of elucidating the various artistic undercurrents and general cultural sensibilities at the turn of China's 1989 transition.[2] It subsequently travelled to venues in Australia and North America. One of the first major shows of China's avant-garde art, the exhibition was hailed for its pivotal contribution in raising public awareness of contemporary Chinese art. Intriguingly, when the exhibition was reinstalled in an abridged form in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, six months later after its opening, it was given a new title: 'Mao Goes Pop'.[3]

Referring to the Sydney exhibition's enormous success and record numbers of visitors, Chang Tsong-zung admitted that the change of title was intended as a clever strategy, since 'Mao Goes Pop' tallied well with 'an inclination prevalent in western institutions: to stress the "dissident" aspect of such art'.[4] Dissidence is an undeniably important feature of contemporary Chinese art, and Chang did not mean to dispute it. Yet he was aware that playing up that aspect involved a certain risk. As he cautioned, 'This would enhance an exhibition's sensational quality, but may also effectively limit it to a passive political voice.'[5]

This chapter addresses the problem Chang Tsong-zung raised and considers China's contemporary art from a historical perspective. In his study of Stalinist art, Boris Groys argues that socialist realism did not abandon the avant-garde project but radicalised what avant-garde itself was unable to accomplish.[6] Similarly, Barbara Mittler identifies the traditional Chinese and Western elements in the production of propaganda during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) and suggests considering Maoist art 'as one development in the broader attempt to create a new but Chinese modern art and

culture' since the beginning of the twentieth century.[7] By highlighting its connection to previous periods, Mittler attempts to challenge the oversimplification of Cultural Revolution art. Such endeavours have drawn scholarly attention to certain *longue durée* undercurrents beneath the apparently radical changes.

While the appropriation and reinvention of Maoist art constituted a significant aspect of contemporary Chinese art, this chapter attempts an emphatically alternative approach to probing Mao's legacy, shifting attention to art concepts and the artists who actively participated in making political propaganda during Mao's time. This shift is not intended to suggest that Maoist imagery is insignificant in mapping Mao's legacy.[8] Rather, it is intended to shed new light on some important issues lying behind those widely circulated political images and artefacts, recognising the intellectual sophistication of the transition from Mao's time to a post-Mao era. Because it would be impossible to present a comprehensive picture of this transition, this chapter will focus on some key intersections between the recent history of Chinese art and Mao's era. It will begin with a discussion of the histories of realism and socialist realism in modern China. Against this background, it then moves to contemporary Chinese artists' responses to Mao's past, drawing on specific examples that challenged the ideology of Maoist art and offered alternative perspectives on art. Finally, the chapter suggests how we might rethink the different ways in which contemporary artists continued their critical reflections on China's socialist past. Their artwork and writings went far beyond mere criticism of political control over art, instead offering effective ways to engage with fundamental questions about art beyond specific cultural and temporary boundaries.

Realism, socialist realism and Mao's revolutionary realism

The term 'realism', which played a pivotal role in Maoist revolutionary art discourse, has provoked intense debates in China since the beginning of the twentieth century. Two different Chinese expressions, *xieshi zhuyi* (写实主义) and *xianshi zhuyi* (现实主义), have been seen as equivalent to the word 'realism'. Although the two have at times been conceived as interchangeable, they imply rather different concepts about art and have their roots in distinctive historical contexts.

The expression *xieshi zhuyi* was commonly used in the beginning of the twentieth century. *Xieshi* (写实) – literally, 'writing about reality' – had already appeared in such early texts as *Wenxin diaolong* (The literary mind and the carving of dragons) by Liu Xie (c. 465–c. 521). As a term that originated in classical Chinese and was returned from modern Japanese, *xieshi* came to be found in the writings of major Chinese artists and intellectuals.[9]

The French-trained Xu Beihong was arguably the most influential artist and art educator committed to the propagation of realism in China. In Shanghai in 1926, Xu gave a public lecture on the reform of Chinese art in which he adopted the phrase *xieshi zhuyi* (写实主义) to mean 'realism'.[10] Although he considered realism part of the native tradition as embodied in the paintings of the Song dynasty (960–1279), Xu Beihong believed that Chinese art should be modernised by looking to European realist artists such as the French painters Gustave Courbet (1819–77) and Jean-François Millet (1814–75), as well as the German painter Wilhelm Leibl (1844–1900).[11] By pointing to the European realist movement, Xu Beihong intended to launch the fight on two fronts: first and foremost, to liberate Chinese artists from the slavish imitation of their own time-honoured masterpieces and, second, to oppose the alternative tendency among contemporary Chinese artists who shunned solid art training by turning to the twentieth-century modernist movements. To express his disdain for the iconic modern French artist Henri Matisse (1869–1954), Xu transcribed his name in Chinese as *Matisi* (马踢死) – meaning, literally, to be kicked by a horse and killed.[12]

A different translation of 'realism', as *xianshi zhuyi* (现实主义), had already emerged in the 1920s and was applied to the new art concept of 'socialist realism'. In 1933 the Marxist theorist Zhou Yang – then an active member in the League of Left-Wing Writers and Artists in Shanghai – wrote a long essay to introduce the Soviet literary critic Valerii Kirpotkin's theory. Zhou adopted the formulation *xianshi zhuyi* for realism to accentuate an immediate connection between art and reality (*xianshi*, 现实). As opposed to *xieshi*, the term *xianshi* is a graphic loanword from modern Japanese *genjitsu*, its kanji expression 現実 coined to translate the English word 'reality'.[13] To create 'art of realism' (*xianshi zhuyi*), Zhou Yang proscribed the equation of reality with trivial details of everyday life and argued that artists had to see reality as the synthesis of different facts rather than a superficial combination of these facts. In Zhou's view, synthesis meant recognising typicality (*dianxing*, 典型) as the key to transcending the surface and capturing the nature of things. The quest for typicality, which defines the way to approach reality, then redirected the key question from 'What is the real?' to 'What is the typical?' Zhou Yang's article represented a radical transformation of the concept of realism that had been propagated in China since the beginning of the twentieth century.[14] The shift from the term *xieshi zhuyi* to *xianshi zhuyi* occasioned a broader transition in modern Chinese art history, from the pursuit of art revolution to that of revolutionary art. In other words, whereas realism for artists like Xu Beihong meant reforming Chinese art, the point zero for Zhou Yang's idea of socialist realism was the reality that was to be transformed.[15]

As the Communist Party came to power in 1949, *xianshi zhuyi* eventually replaced *xieshi zhuyi* and became the dominant expression of realism in

the official account of art ideology during Mao's era. At the second National Congress of Literary and Arts Workers in 1953, Zhou Yang, by then a party spokesman, announced 'socialist realism' as the new official art policy. In contrast to his earlier essay, Zhou's 1953 talk on socialist realism underlined the role of political ideology. He insisted on the party's policy as the guideline for art production, arguing that the policy was made according to the objective principle of social development to represent the fundamental interest of the people. Zhou also recast the notion of typicality as the central concern of artistic representation to bridge reality and political correctness. As the opposite of realism, Zhou Yang pointed to 'subjectivism' (*zhuguan zhuyi*, 主观主义), which in his view reflected an artist's incapability to comprehend and represent reality. Yet at the core of his attack on subjectivism was the importance of ideology, defined by Zhou as Marxism-Leninism coupled with the party's policy.

Paradoxically, Mao Zedong's famous *Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art*, which became an important guideline of the party's art policy after 1949, originally did not contain the term 'socialist realism'. Scholars have pointed out that an important goal for Mao's 1942 Yan'an Talks was to discipline the left-wing writers and artists in the communist-controlled area, many of whom had become reluctant to produce propaganda work.[16] Mao seemed to deliberately avoid the expression 'socialist realism', which was popular among leftist intellectuals, and instead relied on the formulation 'revolutionary art'. Only in the post-1953 edition of Mao's Yan'an Talks was 'socialist realism' added as a substitute for 'proletarian realism' in the original text.[17]

The preferences for different terms expose a deeper division of opinions between Mao's talks and Zhou Yang's earlier writing about socialist realism. At the core of Mao's agenda was an official mandate to remould artists and writers into 'art and literary workers' (*wenyi gongzuozhe*, 文艺工作者), indicating a significant shift of their position from active educators of the people to more passive recipients of education based on their contact with the people.[18] In his Yan'an Talks, Mao emphasised the necessity for art and literary workers to study Marxism and Leninism. He denied any individual vision of the truth and replaced it with identification with political ideology. Thus the mission for art and literary workers whom Mao ordered to go into the masses was accordingly to learn the language of the people and produce compelling representations so that the party's political message could reach the public at large.

In this context, Zhou Yang's 1953 speech can be seen largely as a reinvention of socialist realism according to Mao's art agenda, rather than as Mao's seeming acceptance of socialist realism. Moreover, in 1958, amid the Great Leap Forward movement, Mao coined a new formula, 'the combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism', during a plenary session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party.[19] Zhou Yang immediately

confirmed the significance of Mao's new formula in a 1958 article for the leading theoretical journal *Hongqi* (Red Flag), by identifying it as the basis of socialist realism.[20] Nevertheless, as Douwe Wessel Fokkema has discussed, there were debates about the relation between socialist realism and Mao's new formula within the Communist Party during the late 1950s. Guo Moruo argued that 'the new term in fact means more than socialist realism, as it brings out a new emphasis on romanticism'. In contrast, Shen Yanbing (Mao Dun) had the 'opinion that the combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism was "less" than socialist realism', for a Marxist-Leninist world outlook was also essential for socialist realism.[21] Shen also cautioned against the superficial imitation of such works as Mao's own poems that exemplified 'the combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism'. Instead, he emphasised the need to learn from Mao's thoughts and make reality (*shiji*, 实际) and the masses the starting points.[22]

As Maria Galikowski has argued, Mao had a personal inclination towards romanticism, and also in his Yan'an Talks he asserted that 'life, as reflected in works of art and literature, could be and ought to be on a higher plane ... more idealised ... than ordinary life and reality'.[23] It is thus perhaps unsurprising that by 1959 Mao's new slogan was officially defined as 'an enrichment and development of socialist realism' for its attention to revolutionary romanticism. Associated with the communist ideals, this emphasis on romanticism could by no means be likened to the party's support of individual subjectivity. Realising that revolutionary romanticism can be double-edged, the party ideologues constantly stressed a distinction between it and 'negative romanticism' based on 'bourgeois individualism'. Folk arts, rather than works by professional artists, therefore appeared to most clearly manifest the new principle of revolutionary romanticism.[24]

During the ensuing Maoist period, the expression of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism became increasingly predominant and was eventually used to justify the art discourse of the Cultural Revolution. Bonnie McDougall also notes that during the Cultural Revolution, 'along with the overthrow of the old Ministry of Culture under Shen Yanbing and Zhou Yang', Mao's Yan'an Talks 'resumed [their] former prominence'.[25] While professional artists fell into disgrace, peasant and worker paintings as well as Red Guard art were brought into greater prominence. The art of the Cultural Revolution, often anonymous or done by some collective group, is infused with politics and charged with revolutionary fervour, its subjects bombastic and sloganised.[26]

The situation changed after the death of Mao in 1976. In the subsequent years, the reconsideration of Maoist art emerged as a salient issue to break through the constraints that the party had imposed on art. But besides demanding to work without political intervention, how were Chinese artists

to respond to the challenges of marking out a path for contemporary avant-garde art and critically engaging in Mao's legacy?

Realist art redefined: Chen Danqing and Liu Xiaodong

In the early years of the post-Mao era, the artist Chen Danqing (陈丹青, b. 1953) was among the first to question the concept of realism. Born in Shanghai, Chen laboured in the rural region of Jiangsu Province during the Cultural Revolution under the communist policy of re-educating young intellectuals. In 1978 he was admitted to the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, where he studied oil painting and became a teacher after his graduation two years later.[27] For his graduation project, Chen Danqing created a series of paintings that represented Tibetan people and their life, boldly 'overturn[ing] the artificiality of the Cultural Revolution aesthetic' based on a typified, formulaic representation of workers, peasants and soldiers (Illustration 2.1).[28]

As the artist recalled, these paintings of Tibetans garnered criticism from his colleagues for their 'lack of distilling the essence of life' and were dismissed as preparatory sketches rather than finished artwork.[29] Chen Danqing published an essay about his own works around the same time, questioning the very tenets of socialist realism. He defended his new artistic pursuit by aligning it with the art of the officially sanctioned models of the nineteenth-century French realist painters Gustave Courbet and Jean-François Millet. Arguing that their works did not support the precepts of the party's art ideology, Chen wrote, 'If Millet were to follow these conventions, then we wouldn't be able to witness his incomparably intimate images of a child learning to walk, urinating, etc.'[30] Using Millet's art as weapon, Chen Danqing described these French painters with the term 'realism' (*xianshi zhuyi*, 现实主义), which he enclosed within quotation marks.

His sly use of punctuation signals the artist's intention to subvert the doctrine of Maoist realism. By reiterating Courbet's commitment to painting only what he could see, Chen Danqing jettisoned the emphasis on the political ideology and the stereotyped representation that underlined the heroism and glorification of the people in communist propaganda. The artist's stated purpose was neither to criticise the backwardness of Tibetan people nor to empathise with them. Instead of turning his painting into a social statement, Chen concerned himself with the unspoken, complex affect he could convey through his representation of everyday life in Tibet.

While his Tibetan paintings became classics in contemporary Chinese art, Chen Danqing's writing on art also represented a pioneering endeavour to critically engage in Maoist art ideology.[31] From New Realistic Painting in the late 1970s to Cynical Realism in the 1990s, realism remained an important issue for the development of various new art movements in post-Mao China.

Chen Danqing (陈丹青), *Xizang zuhua – Kangba hanzi* (Tibetan series – Tibetan shepherds, 西藏组画-康巴汉子), 1980 **2.1**

Scholars and critics have attributed the recurrence of realism to the significant continuity sustained by China's art education system, which insisted on realistic representation as a main focus of foundational training.[32] Trained in academic realism, the younger generation of oil painters turned their art 'to very personal reflections on themselves and their times, most often in the form of technically polished depictions of their ennui'.[33]

Styling himself as a realist (*xianshi zhuyi*, 现实主义) artist, Liu Xiaodong (刘小东, b. 1963) published an article titled 'Zunzhong xianshi' (Respect reality) in 1991, along with a photograph of himself and his oil painting *Zhong*

2.2 Liu Xiaodong (刘小东), *Zhong xia* (Mid-summer, 仲夏), 1989

xia (Mid-summer) (Illustration 2.2).[34] Liu also studied oil painting at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, where he began teaching in 1994. He participated in the 1989 'China/Avant-Garde' exhibition at the prestigious Zhongguo Meishu Guan (China Art Gallery) in Beijing and the Hong Kong exhibition 'China's New Art, Post-1989'.[35] In his article, Liu defined realism as 'documentation and immediacy', implying the utter abandonment of the conceptual 'typification'. His paintings, as Liu wrote, would deliberately retain traces of ambiguity and obscurity to remind viewers of the inevitable gap between human perception and reality.[36]

Liu Xiaodong indicated that he was still interested in looking for commonalities behind the individual figures he portrayed. For him, this interest was not concerned with artificial stereotypes and political purposes, but with his communication with viewers about their shared concerns in China's

contemporary society. Yet reluctant to impose his own vision of reality, Liu wished to convey through his representation more than what he had described and thought.[37] Ultimately Liu's awareness of the autobiographical aspect of his paintings redirected attention to the unsettling tension at play between artist and the public.

Realist artist revisited: Xu Bing and Gu Yuan

In 1996, when living in the East Village of New York City, the artist Xu Bing (徐冰, b. 1955) wrote an intriguing article calling for the appreciation of the celebrated communist artist Gu Yuan (古元, 1919–96). Like Chen Danqing, Xu had been sent to work in the fields during the Cultural Revolution, and he entered the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1977. Xu studied printmaking and served as an instructor at the academy after his graduation. With his work *A Mirror to Analyse the World (A Book from the Sky)*, Xu Bing also took part in the 1989 'China/Avant-Garde' exhibition. In 1990 he moved to the US. His installation *Brailliterates* (1992) was included in the Sydney exhibition 'Mao Goes Pop'.[38]

Xu Bing's article on Gu Yuan appeared under different titles in major Chinese art and literary journals, with some variations among the versions.[39] What is remarkable about the article is that Xu did not express bitterness about his experience during the Cultural Revolution, nor did he advocate a total rejection of Maoist art agenda. He stated that the works of his teacher, the renowned communist woodcut artist Gu Yuan, inspired him in his experimental projects, which tackle central political and cultural issues in contemporary society.

Arriving in Yan'an in 1938 at the age of eighteen, Gu Yuan had only a brief period of training in woodcutting in the wartime communist base from 1939 to 1940. He rose to fame as an exemplary communist woodcut artist before 1949 and enjoyed high political prestige during the People's Republic. He was elected to the national committee of the first All-China Congress of Literary and Arts Workers in 1949 and also served as a founder of the Sino-Soviet Friendship Association and a member of the council of Chinese Folk-Art Research Society, among others. In 1958 Gu Yuan joined the teaching staff of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, where he taught printmaking and served as president of the academy between 1983 and 1987.

In his article Xu Bing talked about the phases he went through to fully appreciate Gu Yuan's art. Drawn to Gu's woodcuts as early as his primary school years, he was interested in his early prints from the Yan'an period during the Cultural Revolution. His experience of rural China deepened his understanding of Gu's woodcuts, as he could easily relate to the village life Gu depicted. Yet it was not until he entered the art academy and received formal

training in woodprinting that Xu realised the significance of Gu Yuan's art. For him, Gu Yuan's realistic representation amounted to much more than learnable techniques that one can master to render specific visual details of peasant life.

Going beyond Gu's representational realism, Xu Bing believed it was essential to recognise the historical significance of Gu Yuan's art in modern Chinese art history. In Xu's view, Gu Yuan's works not only captured the social, political revolution in China but also embodied the core spirit of avant-garde art that engaged in the transformation of the old artistic concept. Xu argued that Gu Yuan's art signalled a profound shift away from the narrower concern about the reform of artistic techniques and thus transcended the earlier debates that centred on the relation between Chinese art and Western art and that between tradition and modernity. From this perspective Xu suggested seeing the spirit of avant-garde embedded in Gu Yuan's art, since his works demonstrated a sensitivity to social and cultural situations, and their new methodological approaches expanded the old horizon of art concepts.

Elevating Gu Yuan to an avant-garde artist from the Maoist era, Xu Bing avoided addressing the painful transformation of Gu's artistic career.[40] In fact, Gu Yuan began by imitating European examples, and then reinvented his style after Mao's Yan'an Talks on art and literature, switching his focus to native folk prints. Xu must have been aware of the political pressure behind Gu Yuan's change, but he advocated a reinvention of the legacy of Maoist artists. The purpose of revisiting this earlier generation of artists, Xu wrote, is not to learn faithfully from their style but to critically rethink their artistic achievements from a new perspective.

In 1999 the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York invited Xu Bing to create a banner to be displayed outside the entrance to the museum. Against a red background, Xu designed a yellow slogan: 'Art for the People: Chairman Mao Said'. The slogan was inscribed neither in Chinese characters nor in conventional English letters but in Xu's own invented system, which reconfigured English words into forms that resembled the square structure of Chinese characters (Illustration 2.3).

The art historian Richard Vinograd rightly points out the connection between Xu Bing's art and his formative years 'under the hypertrophied semiotic regime of the Cultural Revolution', with its ubiquitous ideological slogans, big-character posters and other visual-textual machinery of political propaganda.[41] The artist also recalled that during the Cultural Revolution he 'could only read Mao's books' and that his works drew from his own cultural tradition, 'which has been filtered through Mao's Cultural Revolution'.[42] Xu Bing's personal experience is without doubt an important source for his art, but the intention of his work goes far beyond any narrow concern with the Maoist past.

Xu Bing (徐冰), *Art for the People*, 1999 **2.3**

The curator of MoMA, Fereshteh Daftari, wrote in 1999, 'The message is clear: "Art for the People" reflects not only Mao Tse-Tung's dictum but the artist's desire to bridge the gap between contemporary art and an alienated public.'[43] Indeed, Xu Bing was aware of such a gap. As he once put it, 'Many people don't understand contemporary art, and they think they are the problem. But actually, the problem is with contemporary art. I want to make work that engages the audience in a friendly way.'[44] In this sense, Xu's banner can be seen as one of a series of attempts the artist made after his emigration to relate to the Western audience. In 1996 Xu Bing created his *New English Calligraphy*, first installed as a simulated classroom in Finland, in which

visitors could practise the ideograms he used for his later MoMA banner. In 1998 Xu also designed the project 'Your Name Please', which allowed visitors to reconfigure their names so as to establish a closer, more personal relationship between his language and his audience.

'The space between cultures, native and adopted', the art historian Jerome Silbergeld argues, 'is frequently dark, uncomfortable, or unexplored.'[45] Yet with his creation of English masquerading as Chinese, Xu Bing transformed the challenge of such a cross-cultural encounter into a creative process to generate a sensibility of difference and liminal space. As the artist stated, he did not want to draw in a Western audience by 'exoticizing' his Chinese-ness, but he felt that 'to use Chinese cultural elements to address global issues, to participate in global cultural debates, is a positive development'.[46]

Mao's idea, for Xu Bing, is without a doubt one of the Chinese cultural elements that he appropriated to create his own art. Much as he reinvented Gu Yuan as an avant-garde artist, Xu transformed the tenets of Maoist art by associating his socially engaged art with the idea of 'art for the people'.[47] At the core of this appropriation is Xu's keen desire to relate to the public, which is not a return to the Maoist art ideology. Xu Bing has made it clear that 'the real problem is not what materials or cultural elements one uses, but the level of one's reflection'.[48] By reiterating Mao's words, Xu Bing spurred critical reflection on both the Maoist past and the political challenges faced by contemporary artists.

Reconceptualising Maoist art and Maoist artists, the writings of Chen Danqing, Liu Xiaodong and Xu Bing represent divergent approaches within the critical trend of contemporary Chinese avant-garde art. As an indispensable part of their reflection on the Maoist legacy, their notions of realism implicate not merely the issue of representation but ways of seeing. From Zhou Yang's emphasis on typicality to Liu Xiaodong's attention to immediacy, the debates about realism embody the more fundamental, far-reaching epistemic changes in modern China.[49]

Along with the evolution of realism, the post-Mao period saw the transformation of the relationship between art and the public. The concept of the people in communist discourse was ultimately paradoxical. While facing the pressing task of legitimising the leadership of the working class through glorification of labour and its 'heroism', Mao and his Communist Party leaders were well aware that, despite their revolutionary zeal, the masses still needed to be re-educated.[50] Contemporary Chinese artists abandoned such conflicting views and the political task of shaping the New Man. Instead, they searched for different forms of art to reach the public as responsive viewers, beyond the specific cultural boundaries.[51]

From the translation of foreign terms like 'realism' and 'socialist realism' to the increasing prominence of contemporary Chinese artists in the

international scene, this bidirectional migration of both art concepts and artists requires a significant shift of viewpoint about Maoist art and its legacy. This cross-cultural perspective, I believe, can be a useful tool for us to escape the customary reduction of Maoist imagery to a political declaration. Chang Tsong-zung warned against the attractive expression 'Mao Goes Pop' for the Sydney exhibition of contemporary Chinese art, but the risk exists also in our reflection of Maoist art in general. It is hoped that this chapter has revealed some hidden dimensions of Maoist art by highlighting the historical and intercultural perspectives.

Notes

1 The exhibition was organised by Hanart TZ Gallery, which Chang Tsong-zung founded in Hong Kong in 1983. In addition to Chang, the curatorial team also included Li Xianting, Oscar Ho, Joyce Hung and Liao Wen.
2 Chang Tsong-zung, 'Into the Nineties', in Valerie C. Doran (ed.), *China's New Art, Post-1989* (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 1993), I.
3 See Chang Tsong-zung, 'Beyond the Middle Kingdom: An Insider's View', in Gao Minglu (ed.), *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 70.
4 Chang, 'Beyond the Middle Kingdom', 70. It is unknown who made the decision to change the title. Leon Paroissien and Nicholas Jose both avoided addressing Maoist art and China's socialist past in their essays for the catalogue. See Leon Paroissien, 'Preface' and Nicholas Jose, 'Towards the World: China's New Art, 1989–93', both in Nicholas Jose (ed.), *Mao Goes Pop: China Post-1989* (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993), 3–4.
5 Chang, 'Beyond the Middle Kingdom', 70.
6 Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 37.
7 Barbara Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013), 10.
8 Elsewhere I have written about Mao's images. See Yan Geng, 'Performing Authority: Mao Zedong's Image at the Founding of the People's Republic of China', in Burglind Jungmann, Adele Schlombs and Melanie Trede (eds), *Shifting Paradigms in East Asian Visual Culture: A Festschrift in Honor of Lothar Ledderose* (Berlin: Reimer Verlag, 2012), 175–190, and Yan Geng, *Mao's Image: Artists and China's 1949 Transition* (Wiesbaden: Springer and J. B. Metzler, 2018).
9 According to Marston Anderson, the first significant use of the modern Chinese term *xieshi* appeared in Liang Qichao's essay 'On the Relationship between Fiction and the Government of the People', published in 1902, when the author lived in Japan. See Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 28.

10 'Xu Beihong yong wuxiandian yanshuo meishu' [Xu Beihong's radio lecture on art], *Shibao* [The Times] (Shanghai), 19 March 1926, reprinted as Xu Beihong, 'Mei de jiepao' [Dissection of beauty], in *Xu Beihong wenji* [Collection of Xu Beihong's essays], ed. Wang Zhen (Shanghai: Shanghai huabao chubanshe, 2005), 12–13.

11 For a further discussion, see David Der-wei Wang, 'In the Name of the Real', in Maxwell K. Hearn and Judith G. Smith (eds), *Chinese Art: Modern Expressions* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001), 28–59; Cheng-hua Wang, 'In the Name of the Nation: Song Painting and Artistic Discourse in Early Twentieth-Century China', in Rebecca M. Brown and Deborah S. Hutton (eds), *A Companion to Asian Art and Architecture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), 537–560.

12 Xu Beihong, 'Sulian meishushi qianxu' [Preface to Soviet art history], *Zhongsu wenhua zazhi* [Journal of Sino-Soviet Culture], 1:1 (1936), 30–32. From a similar perspective, Xu wrote about Russian art. He lauded the works of Vasily Perov (1834–82) and Ilya Repin (1844–1930) using the term *xieshi zhuyi* but criticised the Russian avant-garde movements that had close links with European modernist movements.

13 Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity – China, 1900–1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 294.

14 To be clear, the word 'realism' in 'socialist realism' was translated as both *xieshi zhuyi* and *xianshi zhuyi* during the 1930s, and the situation changed after the Communist Party came to power in 1949.

15 Boris Groys has written about the evolution of the classical avant-garde movement into socialist realism in Russia. He describes it as a shift in the target of the revolutionary agenda, from artistic tradition to ultimate reality, with the subsequent demand 'that art move from representing to transforming the world'. Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, 14–15 and 41–42.

16 See Timothy Cheek, *Mao Zedong and China's Revolution: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books, 2002), 112.

17 Francesca Dal Lago, 'Between High and Low: Modernism, Continuity, and Moral Mission in Chinese Printmaking Practices 1930–1945' (PhD dissertation, New York University, 2005), 24. For major changes in Mao's Yan'an Talks from the 1943 and 1944 version to the 1953 and 1966 version, see Bonnie S. McDougall, *Mao Zedong's 'Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art': A Translation of the 1953 Text with Commentary*, Michigan Papers in Chinese Studies, no. 39 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980), Appendix 1, 87–104.

18 See Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker, *Ideology, Power, Text: Self-Representation and the Peasant 'Other' in Modern Chinese Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 40. For a thorough analysis of the text, see Rebecca Karl, *Mao Zedong and China in the Twentieth-Century World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 62–64.

19 Scholars have pointed out that Mao's idea was prompted by the wish to advance over the Soviets and to stress the significance of Chinese literary history, but its deeper origin ought to be traced as well to the 'economic subjectivism and

voluntarism'. See Perry Link, *The Use of Literature: Life in the Socialist Chinese Literary System* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2000), 114; Douwe Wessel Fokkema, *Literary Doctrine in China and Soviet Influence 1956–60* (The Hague: Mouton, 1965), 200–201.

20 Zhou Yang, 'Xin minge kaituo le shige de xin daolu' [The new folk song cleared a new road for poetry], *Hongqi* [Red Flag], 1 (1958). Zhou Yang's article was reprinted, with those of Guo Moruo and Shen Yanbing (mentioned below) among others, in the book *Lun gemingde xianshi zhuyi he gemingde langman zhuyi xiangjiehe* [On the combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism] (Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 1958), 1–14.

21 Fokkema, *Literary Doctrine in China and Soviet Influence 1956–60*, 199–200. Fokkema has rightly pointed out Guo Moruo's personal interest in romanticism. I would like to add that Shen Yanbing, who was also particularly drawn to realism from the 1920s, had emphasised the role of outlook in the creation of proletarian art as well. See Shen Yanbing, 'Lun wuchan jieji yishu' [On proletarian art], *Wenxue zhoubao* [Literature Weekly], 172, 173, 175 and 196 (2, 17 and 31 May and 24 October 1925), reprinted in *Mao Dun wenyi zalunji* (A collection of mao dun's essays on literature and the arts) (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1981), 182–199.

22 Mao Dun (Shen Yanbing), 'Guanyu geming langman zhuyi' [On revolutionary romanticism], *Chunüdi* [Virgin Soil], 8 (1958), reprinted in *Lun gemingde xianshi zhuyi he gemingde langman zhuyi xiangjiehe*, 32–36.

23 Maria Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China 1949–1984* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1998), 100–101.

24 Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China*, 102–104.

25 See McDougall, 'Introduction', in McDougall, *Mao Zedong's 'Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art'*, 39–40.

26 Ellen Johnston Laing, *The Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 63–65. I want to make it clear that I do not mean to generalise the art of Cultural Revolution, as many scholars have written about its diversity and complexity; see e.g. Julia F. Andrews's monograph *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China 1949–1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) and Melissa Chiu and Shengtian Zheng's *Art and China's Revolution* (New York: Asia Society; New Haven: in association with Yale University Press, 2008).

27 Chen Danqing emigrated to the US in 1982 and returned to China in 2000.

28 See Julia Andrews and Shen Kuiyi, *The Art of Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 207.

29 Chen Danqing, 'Wo de qi zhang hua' [My seven paintings], *Meishu yanjiu* [Art Research] (1981), no. 1, 49–53. The distinction between *xizuo* (studies) and *chuangzuo* (creation) that Chen discusses related to the art curriculum reform after 1949. See Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China*, 57.

30 Chen, 'Wo de qi zhang hua', 50; excerpt of the text translated by Michelle Wang in Wu Hung (ed.), *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 25–29, esp. 27.

31 One of this series of paintings was reproduced in the Hong Kong catalogue *China's New Art, Post-1989* as a representative work of the major trends of contemporary Chinese art. See 'Illustrated Notes to Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Art by Li Xianting', in Doran (ed.), *China's New Art, Post-1989*, XCI, no. 82.

32 See Chang, 'Into the Nineties', III. Also see Shao Yiyang, 'Chinese Modern Art and the Academy' (PhD dissertation, University of Sydney, 2003).

33 Andrews and Shen, *The Art of Modern China*, 259.

34 According to the artist, the man in the painting is his classmate at school (email correspondence, 16 March 2017).

35 For the 1989 'China/Avant-Garde' exhibition, see Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 141–166.

36 Liu Xiaodong, 'Zunzhong xianshi' [Respect reality], *Meishu yanjiu* [Art Research] (1991), no. 3, 18.

37 Liu, 'Zunzhong xianshi', 19.

38 Xu Bing, *Brailliterates*, in Jose (ed.), *Mao Goes Pop*, 21.

39 See Xu Bing, 'Gu Yuan de yiyi' [The significance of Gu Yuan], *Tianya* [The Skyline], 1 (1997), 138–140; Xu Bing, 'Wo xinzhong de Gu Yuan' [Gu Yuan in my mind], *Meishu yanjiu*[Art Research] (1997), no. 1, 15–17; Xu Bing, 'Dongde Gu Yuan' [Understanding Gu Yuan], *Yishu zhongguo* [Art China], 1 (2014), 30–32; Xu Bing, 'Dongde Gu Yuan' [Understanding Gu Yuan], in Xu Bing, *Wo de zhen wenzi* [My real words] (Beijing: Zhongxin chuban jituan, 2016), 78–85.

40 Gu Yuan talked about his 'painful' transformation in his article 'Dao da luyi qu xuexi' [Studying at the big Lu Xun Academy of Literature and Art], *Meishu* [Fine Arts], 3 (1962), 10.

41 Richard Vinograd, 'Making Natural Language in Contemporary Art', in Roger T. Ames and Hsingyuan Tsao (eds), *Xu Bing and Contemporary Chinese Art* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 96.

42 Simon Leung et al., 'Pseudo-Languages: A Conversation with Wenda Gu, Xu Bing, and Jonathan Hay', *Art Journal*, 58:3 (Autumn 1999), 94.

43 Fereshteh Daftari, 'Projects 70: Banners I', *MoMA*, 2:10 (December 1999), 15.

44 Leung, 'Pseudo-Languages', 96.

45 Jerome Silbergeld, 'The Space Between: Cross-Cultural Encounters in Contemporary Chinese Art', in Ames and Tsao (eds.), *Xu Bing and Contemporary Chinese Art*, 180.

46 Leung, 'Pseudo-Languages', 91.

47 His projects should not be dismissed as having no social significance simply because they do not generate an immediate and measurable impact, as it is unrealistic to expect this sort of transformative effect from a single work of art.

48 Leung, 'Pseudo-Languages', 91.

49 Jonathan Hay has argued that 'the conventional model of influence tends to lead to a focus on the identification of sources and borrowings, to the exclusion of epistemic shocks to the system that are harder to pin down but may

ultimately be more far-reaching'. See Jonathan Hay, 'Towards a Theory of the Intercultural', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 35 (Spring 1999), 6.

50 Dobrenko discussed this issue of heroism in the context of the Soviet Union. See Evegeny Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism*, trans. Jesse M. Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 113–114.

51 Here I am inspired by Xiaobing Tang's discussion of China's avant-garde art. See Xiaobing Tang, *Origins of the Chinese Avant-Garde: The Modern Woodcut Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 217–218.

Art, Global Maoism and the Chinese Cultural Revolution

Edited by
Jacopo Galimberti, Noemi de Haro García and Victoria H. F. Scott

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